

Mentana montage

Documentary photographer's latest project combines art and community organization

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Entering the basement of the Habitations de Mentana (HLM) social housing block at St. André and Rachel last Thursday was rather like interrupting a birthday party for a well-loved great-aunt: balloons pinned to the door, a table hidden beneath bowls of carrot sticks and chips, and family photos covering the walls. Except these photos weren't the beloved snapshots of a proud household; rather, they were the result of months of work by photographer Jacinthe Robillard. The event was, in fact, the vernissage for Robillard's most recent exhibition, entitled "Les Jardins Mentana." In creating the work, which was a collaboration with the Place aux familles project and the Centre local de services communautaires (CLSC) Plateau-Mont-Royal, Robillard went into a Montreal housing project (in Quebec called habitations à loyer modique, or HLMs) and took photographs, with the aim of exploring the way that identity is linked to the domestic environment.

Unusually, the exhibit is almost exclusively viewable online. Besides the practical side to this – DARE-DARE, the organization that facilitated the project, does not have an exhibition space – Robillard said that making the work available online opens the project up to the community, "because people are at home and they can watch whenever they please." However, "the vernissage was very important to me," she continued. "It's important the families are there, the kids, so you can ask them questions." Having the subjects of the art running around you, as was the case during the vernissage, does provide, as Robillard emphasized, "another relationship" – a very different form of involvement with the subjects than the somewhat detached experience of seeing them in a gallery.

Robillard started work on the project with four families last September. To get on such intimate terms with the families obviously took time, and Robillard "wanted to focus on families as a whole, even if they have moments of solitude." She emphasized the importance of using natural light in her work, and with the shorter days in fall, she had to start using flash equipment, "bringing some sort of a distance.... You can feel that [in the early photos]." But her subjects changed along with the light, becoming more personal and confident – "they're not posing for me as a photographer,



Courtesy of Jacinthe Robillard

Robillard aimed to explore the way that identity is linked to the domestic environment.

but for me just looking at them."

With an exhibition like "Les Jardins Mentana," the question of voyeurism is bound to come up. But that word conjures connotations of objectification that simply don't apply to Robillard's work. "My work is not about the voyeurism at all, because there's this desire of just showing how people live," she noted. This inclination came to her strongly in her childhood – Robillard recollected growing up in a typical bland suburb in Laval, and the suicide of a young friend when she was 12. "That day my dad said we might live in houses that are all the same, but behind closed doors we don't know what's going on," she remembered. And it was this desire to show people's lives through photography that drove her to a project similar to "Les Jardins Mentana" that Robillard did previously in the HLM Habitations Jeanne-Mance. "I wondered if [the] people living there were happy.... I wanted to see who lived there," she explained. "I have

this interest for other people's lives." This interest is evident in every shot. "I want to show them as they are," she said. Her own voice is paramount in achieving this purpose. Though many people associate the term "documentary photography" with objectivity, Robillard pointed out that "as soon as you frame the world there's no objectivity, because it's your eyes seeing." And seeing these people through Robillard's eyes is the beauty of the project. "I find the pictures are coming out beautiful," she said, "but at the same time when you really pay attention...you can see where sometimes it's less pretty. I'm there to make them feel beautiful; that's how I see them."

Robillard didn't plan to choose HLMs for her projects, "it just turned out that way." The HLM environments are fascinating to her because they embody a social class that is distinct from mainstream Montreal culture. Habitations de Mentana is in the heart of the Plateau – a couple of blocks west of Parc La Fontaine

between Duluth and Rachel – but the families living there rarely integrate with the local community. Robillard mentioned factors of cost: for example, the Villanueva family, with whom she worked most extensively, takes monthly trips to wholesale grocers in Plattsburgh, N.Y., to stock up for the month. The attitudes of the children are surprising – many were worried about people knowing where they live and stealing them from their parents. She talked of the trouble getting many families to participate – noticeably her photos of the O'Neill family are all placed outside, rather than in their home, as the other participants' are, and many other families were unwilling to get involved.

But the project has had a positive effect on the families featured. "They were very proud and I was very happy [with that]," Robillard said. The children got fully involved, and their excitement was tangible during the vernissage – talking with Robillard was tricky when she

was constantly being caught up in bear-hugs, and many declared their experience "Fantastique!"

The CLSC organized this project with the participation of DARE-DARE, who selected Robillard from a pool of candidates. Well-meaning social work projects of this sort are always trying to integrate art with societal reform. In this case, though, Robillard has succeeded. The photos produced are at once art – satisfying our basic curiosity to see other people's lives beautifully portrayed – and a community project – enabling subjects to feel part of something. But it seems clear that the real way these photos improve lives is by affecting the lives of others: opening the eyes of other Montrealers – including most McGill students – to a life so foreign to their own.

See the exhibit online at lesjardins-mentana.com, where Robillard continues to post new photos.